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### The Unlearning Organisation

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## **The Unlearning Organisation:**

### **Cultural Devolution and Scotland's Visual Arts 1967-2015**

Neil Mulholland

Public subsidy of the arts was devolved nearly 50 years ago from the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB) to Scotland in 1967 when the Scottish Arts Council (SAC) was founded as a branch of the ACGB. This devolution was asymmetrical as Arts Council England (ACE) was not established until 1994, at which point SAC became fully autonomous.

Based in Edinburgh, in its early years, SAC was effectively a colonial-branch of ACGB, loyally following John Manyard Kenyes' arm's length / 'few but roses' approach. ACGB was a Cultural NHS espousing an Arnoldian view of culture. While SAC was closer to the coal face, it didn't embrace an anthropological conception of culture.

In terms of the visual arts - the foundation of SAC coincided with a period of heightened cultural self-determination in Scotland which was flamed by the international counterculture of the late '60s. Younger artists were rejecting the conservative Royal Academy clones in Scotland's major cities and, instead, setting up their own progressive organisations.

These took two distinct forms:

1. **MEANS OF PRODUCTION:** Studios & Workshops (e.g. WASPS, Print Studios, Sculpture Workshops); without such facilities artists would not have been able to make work and so would have to move to another city to establish a viable working studio, as most ambitious artists did up until the 1970s.
2. **SYSTEMS OF DISTRIBUTION:** Artist-run Initiatives (ARIs): There were no suitable galleries to exhibit work in Scotland. So artists had to establish their own galleries. e.g. New 57, Demarco Gallery, Jim Haynes Paperback Bookshop, etc.

Both types of organisation are reciprocally intertwined. They gained vital financial support from the new SAC..... SAC, however, had different long-term plans for the visual arts, preferring to establish and run its own galleries (e.g. Travelling Gallery, Edinburgh Charlotte Square Gallery,

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Glasgow Blythwood Square Gallery) much in the 'salon' style of the National Galleries of Scotland (e.g. the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art had been based in Inverleith House since 1960) and the private galleries of Cork Street in London. Unlike the NGS, SAC Galleries were distributed, but not devolved: they were all run directly from Charlotte Square. In this sense, the embryonic Scottish Patron State took a very long time to establish a more arm's length relationship with its benefactors, the perception in London being that there were no worthy arts benefactors in Scotland, that SAC had to invent them.

For example, the most influential gallery in late 20th century in Scotland was the New 57. It emerged from the 57 Gallery, founded in 1957. For most of the '70s it was based in Rose Street before settling upstairs from the SAC Gallery Edinburgh (upstairs part of what's now Fruitmarket).

It made its constitution from copying and editing those of A.I.R. and SPACE in London as well as similar organisations in New York visited by committee members in the late '60s and early '70s (PS1 NYC was pivotal in this). This is when it added 'New' to its name. Committee members were also simultaneously setting up WASPS in Edinburgh, Dundee and Glasgow, again, A.I.R. and space were a big influence here as was the concurrent discourse on self-determination that they devoured in the pages of the *Scottish International* magazine.

The model New 57 established involved having an unpaid committee of six who are able to serve no more than two years as directors. Their job was to be a committee for the contemporary visual arts and support lay members of their organisation who all pay a small fee to cover the ARI's running costs. They are accountable to the collective's members. To avoid conflicts of interest, committee cannot show or promote their own work. This precise democratic model has been copied across Scotland by: Collective, Transmission, Generator, Embassy and by Catalyst and 126 in Ireland. While it's by no means exceptional, nor 'Scottish' in origin, Scotland is internationally celebrated for pursuing this particular model, and so is all too often naïvely mythologised as a Shangri-la by artists living elsewhere.

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The New 57's move to a collectivist committee structure overlapped with the slow establishment of SAC's Glasgow Arts Centre in first half of the 1970s. SAC had a room in the Glasgow Lady Artists' Club in Blythwood Square since 1967. It mainly exhibited touring exhibitions sent to educate provincial Scots by the ACGB in London.

## 1971

Blythwood Square was a slice of Cork Street 'civilisation' in deepest darkest Glasgow. It had a Cona Coffee Maker and served egg and cress sandwiches. By 1971, the Lady Artists' Club finally declared bankruptcy and so SAC bought the building from them for £35,000. SAC held a 'Talk-In' on the 9th February 1971. The Glasgow League of Artists, who'd formed in 1968, proposed to requisition the building as a rentable gallery and printmaker's workshop for local artisans and act 'democratically' as its 'advisory committee' (i.e. to establish the New 57 model in Glasgow).

SAC, instead, decided to appoint a live-in Director to take care of the building and to programme events for Glasgow *in* Glasgow. They appointed the visionary *International Times* editor and playwright Tom McGrath, who also found time to write plays and establish the Tron theatre while directing what became Third Eye Centre. McGrath patronised younger Scottish artists while bringing a wide array of intermedia into Third Eye's programme (along similar lines to New 57 European/Joseph Beuys/Postminimalism lineage by then well developed in Edinburgh). He introduced Glasgow to photo/video community studios, muralism and American forms of social practice informed by field trips to NYC and Chicago. This kind of artistic activity was actively discouraged by Glasgow and Edinburgh Art Schools - only DJCAD in Dundee ran courses in new media and public art.

In spite of this confident self-determination, the attitude at SAC remained that Scotland was recovering from a modernist by-pass and SAC's role was

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to give it a crash course: The Second Earl Haig of the SAC wrote to McGrath regarding his proposed inaugural programme of 1974:

"...there should be no difficulty in enabling Glasgow viewers to have the opportunity of absorbing and learning some of the main trends. Apart from Rennie McIntosh [sic.] there doesn't seem to be any items in your list which cover this sort of thing. Joan Eardley and Stanley Spencer, though good artists, are not part of any of the main movements which I have in mind..."<sup>[5]</sup>

While SAC part-funded ARIs such as New 57, it did so reluctantly. It gave them a pittance compared to funding for Demarco's projects. (Demarco is also an artist of course). This was not because Demarco's ARI was better networked, but because Demarco - as an accountable quasi-commercial gallerist in the Cork Street tradition - represented forms of continuity and advocacy recognisable to the SAC. SAC, in this sense, supported organisations that mirrored the Bloomsbury values it had inherited from ACGB, thus rejecting *The Scots Cellar*, the tendency of Scotland's artists to embrace a volkish collectivism in the '70s.<sup>1</sup> This risk aversion did not pay off. It was New 57, Transmission and Collective, not Demarco or the NGS, who spearheaded what became Scotland's first *home-grown* international art movement since Art Nouveau, the New Image.

### 1979

SAC's had high hopes that the devolution referendum of 1979 would make SAC directly answerable to Edinburgh's *New Parliament House*.

"My guess is that the Government will decide that the arts will be devolved to Scotland, partly because it makes sense and goes with related functions, and partly because both main parties are so scared of giving Scotland real

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<sup>1</sup> A number of artists involved with New 57 saw the reciprocal nature of the art economy as an expression of the customary solidarism of the 'Scots Cellar', Robert Burns' 'social glass' and Edinburgh's uniquely 'Democratic Intellect'. See F. Marian McNeill, *The Scots Cellar: Its Traditions and lore*, 1956.

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economic power that they will compensate by giving Scotland everything except real economic power.”<sup>2</sup>

However, an ACGB inspired lack of trust in artists (and, more generally, in the ability of *Scotti* to directly govern their own culture) intensified throughout the 1970s and, with the failure of the '79 to deliver devolution, into the '80s.

In the late '70s, SAC increased pressure on New 57 to appoint and pay an 'accountable' Director. By the early '80s they were in talks to merge with the SAC Gallery in Edinburgh to form the Fruitmarket Gallery. In 1984, part of the New 57 committee narrowly voted to merge. The other half of the committee refused and formed Collective on the same New 57 constitution (so today's Collective is really the continuation of New 57... which makes it Scotland's oldest ARI.) Fruitmarket very quickly appointed a Director and abandoned its artist committee forever (so the Collective group were correct to mistrust them).

When McGrath departed Glasgow, artists in the city were given fewer and fewer opportunities to show there as Third Eye attempted to be more 'international' - which meant a return to lots of imported touring exhibitions. Their disgruntlement led to consultation with members of New 57 in Edinburgh and this, in turn, birthed Glasgow's Transmission Committee for the Visual Arts in 1983.

## **1992**

Ten years on and SAC were now strong-arming Transmission and Collective to appoint a paid 'accountable' Director. They withdrew funding from both ARIs until they acquiesced. Collective, with high rents and little support from Edinburgh Council were forced to appoint a Director in 1992. Transmission held out and, during the 'Scotia Nostra' period in which its international reputation skyrocketed, won its battle with SAC. In the early

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<sup>2</sup> Alexander Dunbar, Director of the Scottish Arts Council 1971-1980, *Devolution and the Scottish Arts Council*, 19th February 1975, p16.

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'00s, Collective finally replaced its committee with a Board; the preferred structure of SAC.

Throughout the 1990s, artists based in Scotland consistently followed the ARI model, establishing their own infrastructure and only seeking public support having built a considerable international reputation - if at all. e.g. Patricia Flemming in Glasgow established a range of studio and exhibition projects through her FUSE programme that were pivotal in the rise of Glasgow as an international visual arts centre. She did this on a shoe-string, exploiting John Major's changes to Unemployment Benefits to the benefit of her peers.

### 1999

By the time the Scottish Parliament reopened in 1999, SAC had been devolved for 32 years old and fully independent for five years. 1999 didn't herald any further cultural devolution of the arts within Scotland, on the contrary. Most 1999 Scottish Election manifestos (excepting that of Labour) were critical of anti-arms length bodies (ALBs).<sup>3</sup> Keynes' arm's-length model was first revoked by the '99 Lib-Lab Scottish Executive who were determined to make SAC an executive body of government. The number of Scottish ALBs has since been reduced substantially [... ] For example, the government "targeted a reduction from 199 in 2007 to 115" by 2011.<sup>4</sup> One ALB that was axed was SAC, disbanded in 2010.

The zombie brainchild of New Labour, Creative Scotland (CS) is a different beast - a Patron State that rejects Arnoldian conceptions of culture and one far less accountable to the public. CS makes no distinction between different art forms seeking Open Project Funding, nor does it distinguish between individual artists and large organisations. CS' current 10-Year Plan *Unlocking Potential Embracing Ambition* places a great deal of emphasis on the 'learning organisation'; on enabling *audiences* to establish the

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Parry, 'Quangos and the Structure of the Public Sector in Scotland' *Scottish Affairs*, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Local Government Information Unit, *The Future of Arm's Length Bodies*, London, March 2012, p6

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parameters of social practice, their own creative hubs, and to actively develop their own infrastructure.<sup>5</sup>

Superficially, this sounds like it an endorsement of an anthropological, democratic and devolved approach to culture. However, CS has tightened SAC's centrist managerial approach. Only the foundational discourse differs in its totalising instrumentalism. So, where SAC recognised distinct and specific artistic practices (and privileged a highly developed if rather naturalised modernist theory of 'practice'), CS is concerned with entirely generic corporatisms such as 'development needs', 'advocacy' and 'influencing'. The cult of personalities and impresarios that dominated SAC in the '70s has been superseded not by transparent 'systems', but by the cult of 'evidence-based' managerialism. SAC saw the visual arts (and artists) as wild things that needed to be sensibly nurtured (*infantilised*) if they were to blossom. CS, in contrast, imagines the visual arts to be, incontestably, part of the cultural industries the key objective of which is culturepreneurial wealth creation. CS, thus, has economised culture rather than encultured the economy. Its goal of 'enabling audiences' (note: not artists or arts organisations), is a familiar euphemism for enthroning consumer choice. Given that there are no artists on the CS Board, this comes as no surprise.

Buried deep within the DNA of CS and the New Labour project from which it arose is structuration theory. According to Anthony Giddens' account of structuration, everyone must become their own system. Certainly, the international development of contemporary art since the late '60s is best understood as a history of artists forming a wide range of formal and informal organisations. Partly as a means of survival and partly for artistic reasons, artists have de-centred themselves in favour of very broad meshworks.

The quasi-personhood of structuration is as rich as it is complex and some of the best research conducted on ARIs shows how their many actor-network paradigms are catalysts for genuine cultural devolution (as opposed to Californian Ideology-style 'creative economics'). However, in a

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<sup>5</sup> My emphasis here on 'audiences'.



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largely rudderless instrument of governance such as CS - one oblivious to its own origins and goals - it has proven to be disastrous (it is notable that the *Creative England* experiment was swiftly abandoned by Labour's own Department of Culture, Media & Sport). The role of centripetal organisations such as CS and the National Galleries of Scotland - arguably incompatible with a structuration based approach to culture - remains unquestioned by the Scottish Government, despite the fact that everything that's vital and celebrated about art in Scotland since the late '60s has emerged from self-devolved organisations and infrastructures.

Luckily artists in Scotland, as elsewhere in the world, continue to establish their own 'learning organisations' and forms self-governance as they have consistently over the past 50 years (e.g. Open House Glasgow / Edinburgh Annuale).

Advocates of devolution or federalism for Scotland and the UK are well served by examining why this impetus continues to exist in the visual arts and can learn much from the new forms it takes.<sup>6</sup> The question of how a centripetal state-let such as Scotland (independent or not) might dissolve its national arts bodies in order to redistribute public resources towards self-evolving organisations and user-generated infrastructures in the arts is a thornier one.<sup>7</sup> The fact that the Scottish Patron state for the arts is more singular and centralised now than it was in 1994, some years prior to political devolution, is no cause for celebration. History clearly demonstrates that the UK state's tendency towards centralisation, under the ACGB and in SAC's early years, failed to nurture practice or support innovation in the arts. In the arts, as in policing and local government, post devolution Scotland is less devolved.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> ACE is a federal structure; there is no reason why CS cannot be.

<sup>7</sup> A good attempt to directly address this during the New Labour era is the Cultural Policy Collective's *Beyond Social Inclusion: Towards Cultural Democracy*, [www.culturaldemocracy.net](http://www.culturaldemocracy.net), 2004.

<sup>8</sup> See Eberhard Bort, Robin McAlpine and Gordon Morgan, *The Silent Crisis: Failure and revival in local democracy in Scotland*, Jimmy Reid Foundation, April 2012.

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There seems to be little point in Scotland having devolved powers if it uses them merely to establish a miniature version of what already exists in the Union State (a pattern that runs consistently from the early C19th: RSE, RSA, NGS, SAC, etc). Devolving the arts should mean fully entrusting them to communities of practice and communities of interest, which is something that ARIs have long embodied constitutionally. Culture is the infinite diversity of absolute opacities. Total noise in the channel. It has no Centre as such, it is a Republic of Static.

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